

COMMENT

Un-American activities

As if the press didn't already have enough credibility problems, it is now being depicted as a conduit for the KGB. Central Intelligence director William J. Casey sounded the alarm in September when he devoted one of his relatively rare public speeches to a description of the "active measures" being employed by the KGB to subvert public opinion. Casey warned especially about "disinformation" — the planting by the Soviets of "half-truths, lies, and rumors to discredit free-world policies or individuals." Disinformation campaigns, Casey added, "are projected and reinforced by media manipulation. The Soviets conduct a massive worldwide effort to manipulate foreign media, thus transforming portions of the press into an unwitting propaganda machine."

The main point of Casey's remarks was that Americans should brace themselves for an all-out disinformation assault on the president's Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as Star Wars. Casey predicted "a propaganda campaign likely to assume unprecedented proportions" as the Soviets give "high priority" to mobilizing opposition to SDI "among our allies and in our country."

While Casey stopped short of suggesting that the KGB had recruited American journalists for its disinformation efforts, a Voice of America employee, Lisa Jameson, articulated just this suspicion in an October talk at Stanford University. Citing as her source two Soviet defectors who had posed as journalists while working for the KGB, Jameson said the KGB may have hundreds of recruited agents among foreign journalists, including some in the United States, who are "ready at any time to place prepared stories in their national media." *Editor & Publisher* was so perturbed by this possibility that in a November 2 editorial it suggested it might be time "we went back to attaching labels to stories that might be suspect as to their origins and facts."

At the same time, readers of the *Los Angeles Times* were given reason to suspect that they had been the victims of "active measures" by the KGB. Richard Sybert, a special assistant to the secretary of defense, wrote in a letter to the *Times*, published on November 2, that a basically critical series on the Strategic Defense Initiative by *Times* reporter Robert Scheer "was a masterpiece of disinformation." Complaining about a "flood of pre-summit disinformation" on the SDI, Sybert attacked Scheer and others for "completely false" statements, "myth," and "fabrication."

In a recent interview, Sybert said that he had not intended to accuse Scheer of disinformation in the sense of the term as used within the intelligence community. Rather, he had used "disinformation" to mean the use of factually wrong

information, "some of which does come from the Soviets," by "people who either know it's wrong or who haven't done their homework." Scheer, said Sybert, had used straw men and red herrings to "very skillfully present a bunch of alleged facts and disinform people." Sybert went on to say that he "in no way intended to suggest that Scheer was an agent of Soviet propaganda, although this sort of thing lends itself to this purpose."

Certainly, the Soviets are out to undermine the president's missile-defense initiative; just as certainly, many Americans — including scores of reputable scientists — are alarmed by the president's plan. The press has an obligation to do its own digging on the issue and to report all sides of the debate, including what critics — both foreign and domestic — have to say.

U.S. officials have obligations, too. If they are going to allege a massive anti-SDI disinformation campaign aimed at the press by the KGB, they should take care not to make indiscriminate allegations of disinformation when that term has become virtually synonymous with intelligence activity. And they should not regard agreement with Soviet views as a Soviet propaganda triumph. Such simplistic thinking can lead to bizarre conclusions.

Take, for instance, Casey's assertion that a prime Soviet disinformation objective is to "encourage European and American antinuclear groups to view the SDI program as threatening an increase in the nuclear arms race when, in fact, it promises the opposite." If the notion that SDI might spur the arms race is to be equated with Soviet propaganda, what is one to conclude about a passage in Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's pre-summit report to the president? In that report, a copy of which was leaked to the press, Weinberger warned that "even a *probable* territorial [Soviet missile] defense would require us to increase the number of our offensive forces and their ability to penetrate Soviet defenses to assure that our operational plans could be executed." Surely the same logic applies in the case of a U.S. missile-defense system.

Disinformation, evidently, can lurk in the unlikelyst places. Meanwhile, in-depth coverage of the debate over SDI would seem to be the best antidote to whatever disinformation Soviet intelligence agents might be trying to sneak into the U.S. press.

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